

### **RRB Approves New Occupational Disability Standards**

On July 15, the U.S. Railroad Retirement Board unanimously approved proposed regulations for the evaluation of claims for occupational disability benefits payable by the Board under the federal Railroad Retirement Act. The proposed regulations are based on joint recommendations negotiated over the past several months by representatives of rail labor organizations and the Association of American Railroads.

The Board must first forward the proposed regulations to the White House Office of Management and Budget for review, after which they will be published in the Federal Register to allow for public comment before becoming final. The proposed regulations will apply prospectively to new claims only.

The proposed regulations were developed through consultation with physicians specializing in occupational disability and representatives of the Railroad Retirement Board. They call for a system based on up-to-date medical standards to replace guidelines that have been in effect for 5 decades and incorporate a number of key principles designed to ensure both the quality and fairness of the system.

The Railroad Retirement Act provides disability annuities for railroaders who become either totally or occupationally disabled. A total disability annuity is based on permanent disability for all employment and is payable at any age to employees with at least 10 years of railroad service. An occupational disability annuity is based on disability for the employee's regular railroad occupation and is payable at ages 60 - 64 if the employee has 10 years of service, or at any age if the employee has at least 20 years of railroad service. A "current connection with the railroad industry" is also required for an occupational disability annuity.

During fiscal year 1996, the Board paid retirement and survivor benefits of over \$8 billion to 818,000 beneficiaries, including \$1.2 billion for disability benefits to almost 80,000 employees. For those receiving benefits based on occupational disability, the average amount being paid per month was almost \$1,400.